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ABSTRACT

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RICHARD M. WEAVER--PROPONENT OF A CONSERVATIVE RHETORIC

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RICHARD M. WEAVER--PROPONENT OF A CONSERVATIVE RHETORIC

Richard M. Weaver had a profound influence on the contemporary American conservative movement in general and on many of its leading spokesmen such as William F. Buckley, Jr., Russell Kirk, Willmore Kendall, and Frank S. Meyer, in particular.[1] So profound was that influence that Frank S. Meyer identifies Weaver as the fons et origo of the contemporary American conservative movement.[2] Weaver is of interest to the student of rhetoric not only because of his philosophical and ideological contributions to American conservatism, but, even more important, because he is the proponent of a unique brand of rhetoric--a conservative rhetoric. The purpose of this paper is to analyze Weaver's concept of the nature and role of rhetoric. In pursuit of this goal more information on Weaver's background, education, and the development of his political and rhetorical views might be useful as well as interesting.

Conversion to Socialism

Weaver was born in Weaverville, North Carolina, in the Piedmont section of the state in 1910. His family moved to Lexington, Kentucky where he grew up and where he received his undergraduate education at the University of Kentucky. While at the University of Kentucky, Weaver came under the influence of a number of professors who were "social democrats." Weaver in the most detailed account of the development of his early political and idealogical views relates their influence on him:

> The professors who staffed this institution were most earnest souls from the Middle Western universities, and many of them--especially those in economics, political science, and philosophy--were, with or without knowing it,

> social democrats. They read and circulated The Nation, the foremost liberal journal of the time; they made sporadic efforts toward organizing liberal or progressive clubs; and of course they reflected their position in their teaching very largely. I had no defense against their doctrine, and by the time I was in my third year I had been persuaded entirely that the future was with science, liberalism, and equalitarianism, and that all opposed to these trends were people of ignorance or malevolence.[3]

Weaver soon became a zealous advocate of socialism. In the same year that he graduated (1932) he joined the American Socialist Party. He served as secretary of the "local" for two years, but soon found that while socialism had a kind of intellectual appeal, the practical work in behalf of socialism produced disillusionment. During this time Weaver enrolled at Vanderbilt University which was the chief seat of the Southern Agrarian school of philosophy and criticism. Here he came under the influence of John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, et al., and was strongly influenced by such books as Ransom's God Without Thunder and I'll Take My Stand: The South and The Agrarian Tradition.[4]

Weaver received his M.A. in England from Vanderbilt in 1934 and continued there for two years of work on the doctorate before accepting a position with a Texas college. His metamorphosis from socialist to archconservative occurred over a period of years and with considerable dissonance:

> . . . I left Vanderbilt poised between the two alternatives (socialism and traditional American political views). I had seen virtually nothing of socialism and centralism in practice, and the mass man I had never met; there was also reluctance over giving up a position once publicly espoused, made somewhat greater by a young man's vanity. Nevertheless, I had felt a powerful pull in the direction of the Agrarian ideal of the individual in contact with the rhythms of nature, of the small-property holding, and of the society of pluralistic organization.[5]

After teaching in Texas for three years and becoming further disenchanted with liberalism as a result of his observations and experiences there, Weaver enrolled at Lousiana State University to pursue a doctoral program. He spent the summers studying at the Sorbonne, Harvard, and the University of Virginia. Receiving the Ph.D. in 1943, he accepted a position in the Department of English at the University of Chicago where he taught for twenty years until his premature death in 1963 at the age of fifty-three.

At the University of Chicago Weaver lived the studied life of a bachelor scholar with three main interests: his classes, his writing, and his extra-classroom lectures. He was a dedicated man; a man with a mission. Much like the prophets of the Old Testament, he lived an austere, almost ascetic life, dedicated to diagnosing the maladies of a society that he believed to be gravely sick, but not sick beyond the remedial power of the proper medicine. The analogy is not inappropriate for Weaver once referred to himself as a "doctor of culture."[6]

Weaver's three main efforts at diagnosing the disease that had infected the "body politic" and prescribing the proper remedy are Ideas Have Consequences (1948), The Ethics of Rhetoric (1953), and Visions of Order (1964) appearing a month after his death.[7] In these books and numerous articles appearing in Modern Age, National Review, Sewanee Review, Commonweal, etc.,"...he conducted a memorable defense of those orthodoxies centering in Christianity, political conservatism, and Ciceronian humanism."[8] Most vital to the restoration of health was the revitalization of rhetoric: "Weaver saw the importance of rhetoric in its ancient and honorable sense, as no other thinker among us, I dare say, has seen it; and it was his sense of the degradation rhetoric has suffered that furnished him with some of the grounds he had for fear about the future of our culture" wrote Eliseo Vivas in the Introduction to Weaver's Life Without Prejudice.[9] Weaver's close friend, Ralph Eubanks wrote: "In the fulfillment of his duty and destiny he became the man he described in a letter to the writer--one of 'the enbattled friends of traditional rhetoric.' In Weaver's judgment these men were 'the upholders of our society.' That is, they were the prime conservators of the values essential to cultural cohesion."[10]

The Nature and Function of Rhetoric

While Richard M. Weaver is generally placed with the "New Rhetoric" theorists, he is also acknowledged to be the most classical of the New Rhetoric proponents. Indeed, he constitutes a bridge between the Classical rhetorical new-Aristotelian sequels and the New Rhetoric theorists such as Burke, Richards, Korzybski, Perelman, Toulmin, Black, and others. He is strongly classical in his orientation and highly

ethical in his emphasis. Richard Johannesen discovered two basic orientations of primary importance in Weaver's rhetorical views: political conservatism and Platonic idealism.[11] Thonssen, Baird, and Braden describe Weaver as "The most traditional and the most classical of (the) advocates of an alternate frame of references for traditional rhetoric . . . ."[12] Scott and Brock classify Weaver as semantical-grammatical in his approach to rhetorical criticism.[13] Eubanks and Baker emphasize the strong value orientation of Weaver's rhetorical views and commend him as a model of an axiological rhetoric.[14]

In "Language Is Sermonic," Weaver gives his most detailed explication of "the office of rhetoric:"

> Rhetoric seen in the whole conspectus of its function is an art of emphasis embodying an order of desire. Rhetoric is advisory: it has the office of advising man with reference to an independent order of goods and with reference to their particular situation as it relates to these. The honest rhetorician therefore has two things in mind: a vision of how matters should go ideally and ethically and a consideration of the special circumstances of his auditors.[15]

Rhetoric then is always functioning in a persuasive context. The rhetor always has a purpose; he has a clear vision of the ideal situation or solution or at least the principles, attitudes, and standards that should be operative and he seeks to lay these before the audience with such clarity, logic, and persuasiveness that they will accept them. To put it more succinctly, Weaver defined rhetoric as "persuasive speech in the service of truth" which should "create an informed appetition for the good."[16]

Weaver views man as the "symbol-using animal." Symbol using becomes "the distinguishing characteristic which separates him from all of the other creatures with which he shares animal attributes" and is "the faculty which has enabled man to create cultures and civilizations . . ."[17] Language is "'the supreme organon of the mind's self-ordering growth.' It is the means by which we not only communicate our thought to others but interpret our thought to ourselves."[18]

Rhetoric and the Nature of Man

A successful rhetoric must recognize the true nature of man as a cognitive, affective being operating always in a historical context. For Weaver rhetoric is the "most humanistic of the humanities." It

> makes use of the resources of both language and literature, but its focus is always upon the human being. In any given case its concern will be with a group of men in their historical, not their general or abstract, situation, for without this concern there is no basis for appeal. It must take into account not only their generic nature, but what they know, what they have experienced, how they feel, and what the chances are of changing their attitudes, if that is desired.[19]

Man, to Weaver, is a creature of choice or volition who is responsible for the choice he makes. He is a highly complex, multinatured being who can and must be appealed to in different ways. He has

> . . . cognitive, aesthetic, ethical, and religious faculties or means of apprehension. The first is the inquiring faculty, which gives him knowledge; the second, which is essentially contemplative, enables him to enjoy beauty; the third enables him to determine the order of the goods and to judge between

right and wrong; and the fourth, which is essentially intuitive, gives him glimpses of his transcendental nature and his destiny.[20]

Weaver recognizes both the cognitive and affective nature of man, but he does not draw a rigid dichotomy. Rhetoric must be addressed to the whole man--to man in history. Its purpose is to "move man's feelings in the direction of a goal. . . . it is concerned not with abstract individuals, but with men in being. Moreover, these men in being it has to consider in relation to forces in being. . . . (it) begins with the assumption that man is born into history. . . . (it) must have historicity as well as logicality."[21] Weaver is very much in tune with Plato, Aristotle, and the classical rhetoricians in his insistence that the rhetor understand the nature of rhetoric, the nature of man, and that he analyze the historical context in which the rhetorical effort is made:

> . . . for the most obvious truth about rhetoric is that its object is the whole man. It presents its arguments first to the rational part of man, because rhetorical discourses, if they are honestly conceived, always have a basis in reasoning. Logical argument is the plot, as it were, of any speech or composition that is designed to persuade. Yet it is the very characterizing feature of rhetoric that it go beyond this and appeals to other parts of man's constitution, especially to his nature as a pathetic being, that is, a being feeling and suffering. A speech intended to persuade achieves little unless it takes into account how men are reacting subjectively to their hopes and fears and their special circumstances . . .[22]

The Relationship of Rhetoric to Dialectic

Weaver agreed with Aristotle that "rhetoric is the counterpart of dialect." Both are essential, the one the handmaid of the other. ". . . dialectic always tries to discover the real syllogism in the argument whereas rhetoric tries to discover the real means of persuasion."[23] Dialectic without rhetoric is sterile, "knowledge in a vacuum," "mere cognition," "social agnosticism," and when operating "along in the social realm is subversive." Without rhetoric, dialectic does not heed the imperative of living. Rhetoric as the handmaid of dialectic "tries to bring opinion closer into line with the truth which dialectic pursues. It is therefore cognizant of popular attitudes . . . . Rhetoric speaks to man in his whole being and out of his whole past and with reference to values which only a human being can intuit."[24]

Rhetoric and Conservatism

Having noted that for Weaver the purpose of rhetoric is "to move man's feelings in the direction of a goal,' one must ascertain what that goal is, especially since it is the goal that makes Weaver's rhetorical views so unique. The goal of rhetoric in Weaver's view is to preserve and conserve the best of one's culture and civilization. Weaver was a conservative in political and social views. He not only tolerated the appellation, but acknowledged its validity and eagerly accepted its obligation. Its appropriateness has been noticed by all who knew him personally or who were acquainted with his writings. While confessing that "my instincts are libertarian," Weaver writes "I am sure that I would never have joined forces with the conservatives if I had not been convinced that they are the defenders of freedom today."[25]

Weaver sees the Twentieth Century conservative as occupying the same ground that the Nineteenth Century liberal occupied--that of the defender "of maximum individual liberty and minimum state inference."[26]

Conservatism Defined

To Weaver "the true conservative is one who sees the universe as a paradigm of essence, of which the phenomenology of the world is a sort of continuing approximation. Or, to put this in another way, he sees it as a set of definitions which are struggling to get themselves defined in the real world."[27] Weaver rejects relativism, positivism, nominalism, existentialism, determinism, or any other philosophy that denies the metaphysical. He does not insist that one believe in or speak in terms of "God," but only that he believe in and respect a metaphysical order:

> It is my contention that a conservative is a realist, who believes that there is a structure of reality independent of his own will and desire. He believes that there is a creation which was here before him, which exists now not by just his sufferance, and which will be here after he's gone. This structure consists not merely of the great physical world but also of many laws, principles, and regulations which control human behavior. Though this reality is independent of the individual, it is not hostile to him. It is in fact amenable by him in many ways, but it can not be changed radically and arbitrarily. This is the cardinal point.

> The conservative holds that man in this world cannot make his will law without any regard to limits and to the fixed nature of things.[28]

Weaver's conservatism is not born of fear, inertia, temperament, nostalgia, or lack of imagination or intelligence. It is not mere "stand-pattism" or even the idea that we should return to some era of "the good ole days." Weaver's conservative--and his ideal rhetor--has a "vision of order" a "hierarchy of goods" and advocates change, restoration, or reformation (or he defends the status quo) that will bring the ideal into reality: "The conservative wants to conserve the great structural reality which has been given us and which is on the whole beneficient."[29] Weaver's conservative "is sometimes found fighting quite briskly for change . . . ."[30]

Like most who have sought to give us a utopian view (whether conservative or liberal), Weaver has not filled in all of the details. Johannesen, Stickland, and Eubanks find Weaver condemning the following societal weaknesses: scientism, nominalism, semantic positivism, doctrinaire democracy, uncritical homage to the theory of evolution, radical egalitarianism, pragmatism, cultural relativism, materialism, emphasis on techniques at the expense of goals, idolization of youth, progressive education, disparagement of historical consciousness, deleterious effects of the mass media, and degenerate literature, music, and art. They find his program for the restoration of health to Western culture calling for the development of a sense of history; balance between permanence and change; reestablishment of faith in ideas, ideals, and principles; maintenance of the "metaphysical right"

of private property; education in literature, rhetoric, logic, and dialetic; respect for nature, the individual, and the ideals of the past; reemphasis on traditional education; and control (but not elimination) of war.[31]

In summary, at the base of Weaver's concept of rhetoric one finds Platonic idealism, political conservatism, and Christian metaphysics. One cannot comprehend his views of the nature and role of rhetoric without understanding this base: "Rhetoric," held Weaver, "is axiological: it kneads values into our lives. Rhetoric is the cohesive force tnat molds persons into a community of culture."[32] Rhetoric is "persuasive speech in the service of truth" and its object is the preservation and conservation of Western culture and civilization.

FOOTNOTES

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[1]Weaver was on the founding editorial board of both the National Review and Modern Age. For testimony to the influence of Weaver see: William F. Buckley, Jr., "In This Issue . . .," National Review, Vol. XIV. No. 16 (April 23, 1963), p. 303; Russell Kirk, "Richard Weaver, RIP," ibid., p. 308; Frank S. Meyer, "Richard M. Weaver: An Appreciation," Modern Age, Vol. (Su-Fall 1970, No. 3-4), p. 243-47.

[2]Meyer, "Richard M. Weaver: An Appreciation," p. 243.

[3]Richard M. Weaver, "Up From Liberalism," Modern Age, III No. 1, (Winter, 58-59), p. 22.

[4]John Crowe Ransom, God Without Thunder (Hamden, Conn.,: Archon Books, 1965, c 1930): Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1930).

[5]Weaver, "Up From Liberalism," p. 23.

[6]Richard M. Weaver, Visions of Order (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), p. 7.

[7]Richard M. Weaver, Ideas Have Consequences (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948): The Ethics of Rhetoric (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1953).

[8]Richard L. Johannesen, et. al., Language Is Sermonic (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), p. 5.

[9]Richard M. Weaver, Life Without Prejudice (Chicago: Henry Regnery Press, 1965), pp. xiii, xiv.

[10]Language is Sermonic, p. 4.

[11]Richard L. Johannesen, "Richard Weaver's View of Rhetoric and Criticism," The Southern Speech Journal, XXXII, No. 2 (Winter, 1966) 133-36.

[12]Lester Thonssen, et. al., Speech Criticism, 2nd ed. (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1970), p. 280.

[13]Robert L. Scott and Bernard L. Brock, Methods of Rhetorical Criticism (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1972), p. 264.

[14]Ralph T. Eubanks and Virgil L. Baker, "Toward an Axiology of Rhetoric," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLVIII, No. 2 (April, 1962), pp. 157-68.

[15]Robert E. Nebergall, Ed., Dimensions of Rhetorical Scholarship (Norman, Oklahoma: Department of Speech. Publishers, 1963), p. 54.

[16]Weaver, Life Without Prejudice, p. 116-118.

[17]Weaver, Life Without Prejudice, p. 46.

[18]Weaver, Life Without Prejudice, p. 51.

[19]Weaver, Life Without Prejudice, p. 116, 117.

[20]Weaver, Visions of Order, p. 85.

[21]Weaver, Visions of Order, p. 63.

[22]Nebergall, Dimension of Rhetorical Scholarship, p. 51.

[23]Weaver, Visions of Order, p. 63.

[24]Weaver, Visions of Order, p. 63-72.

[25]Weaver, Life Without Prejudice, p. 157.

[26]Johannesen, et al., Eds., Language Is Sermonic, p. 132.

[27]Weaver, The Ethics of Rhetoric, p. 112.

[28]Weaver, Life Without Prejudice, p. 158-159.

[29]Weaver, Life Without Prejudice, p. 159.

[30]Weaver, The Ethics of Rhetoric, p. 113.

[31]Johannesen, et al., Eds., Language Is Sermonic, p. 15, 16.

[32]Johannesen, et al., Language Is Sermonic, p. 17, 18.